

## Esja's Cave

### Giantesses, Sons and Mothers in *Kjalnesinga Saga*

*Kjalnesinga saga* (The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes) tells of settlers from Ireland who took land on Kjalarnes, below Mount Esja north of Reykjavik.<sup>1</sup> It is preserved in one parchment manuscript (AM 471 4to) from the latter half of the fifteenth century and several seventeenth century paper manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> The events of the saga are meant to have taken place around 900, but the saga itself was probably composed in the fourteenth century. Although classified with the *Íslendingasögur* (family sagas) it shares many features with the *fornaldarsögur* (legendary sagas). *Kjalnesinga saga* is an eclectic composition with borrowings from other written sources. The saga has not had much scholarly attention. Scholars have mainly focused on literary repetition of the saga, especially its traces of Irish tradition.<sup>3</sup> Although not highly rated as literature or a historical source, *Kjalnesinga saga* has interesting features. One of the themes of *Kjalnesinga saga* is constructing masculinity, the relationship of young men with their mothers or proxy-mothers, and the awakening of the young men's sexuality.

Encounters with giantesses is a frequent theme in Old Norse myth and legend. Young men fight and kill giantesses, are helped and guided by them, and even seduced by them.<sup>4</sup> Helpful giantesses fall mainly into two types, the incongruous partner and the pseudo-mother.<sup>5</sup> In *Kjalnesinga saga*, the central character Búi Andriðsson,

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<sup>1</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 5; "The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes" 1997, 305–328.

<sup>2</sup> Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, xviii–xix.

<sup>3</sup> See esp. Helgi Guðmundsson 1967.

<sup>4</sup> McKinnell 2005, 147–196.

<sup>5</sup> McKinnell 2005, 196.

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is fostered by the rich and powerful Irish widow Esja and later he has an affair with a giant's daughter who has a son with him. His foster-mother Esja is human but she resembles “the helpful giantess” and “pseudo-mother”. She arrives with a group of Irish settlers who had all been baptised, but the text emphasises that she has magical powers and thus implies that she was pagan. Esja is linked with wild nature and able to control natural forces with her magical power. She lives at a farm, *Esjuberg*, and she has also a secret cave in the mountain which still bears her name, Esja, although never mentioned in the saga.<sup>6</sup> Esja acts as Búi's proxy-mother and takes on the role to make a man out of him. Búi Andriðsson is also of Irish origin. His father, Andriður, and Esja arrived in Iceland on the same boat.

In Old Norse literature, men are defined either in a positive way, that is according to an ideal, or in a negative way, when compared to children or women. The characteristics of children and women often merge into one and represent everything that man should not be. Comparisons of this kind are frequent in the *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>7</sup> The settler Helgi bjóla, one of the positively depicted male characters in *Kjalnesinga saga* was “nytmenni mikít í fornum sið, blótmaðr lítill, spakr ok hægr við alla” (“a very helpful man who followed the old religion, though he seldom made sacrifices, and he was wise and gracious to all”). His sons, Þorgrímr and Arngrímr, are “miklir ok sterkir ok inir vaskligustu menn” (“big and strong and very bold”).<sup>8</sup> Helgi bjóla and his sons represent male virtues: strength, bravery and wisdom.

When the Irish settler Andriður, later to become the protagonist's Búi's father, enters the saga, he is also described as an ideal male: “mikill ok sterkur” (“big and strong”).<sup>9</sup> Arngrímr and Þorgrímr are both originally endowed with good qualities but they represent pagans in the heathen-non-heathen / Christian-Celts tension which characterises the narrative. Arngrímr is not prominent but his powerful

<sup>6</sup> On the name Esja, see Jóhannes Halldórsson 1959, xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2005, 87–100.

<sup>8</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 3; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 305.

<sup>9</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 6–7; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 306.

brother is shown in a negative light. Þorgrímr is a “blótmaðr mikill” (“made many pagan sacrifices”), and ambitious, “gerðist hann heraðs-ríkr” (“he became powerful”). His son Þorsteinn inherits his father’s arrogant and unbalanced nature, he was: “Snemmindis uppivözlumaðr mikill ok þótti allt lágt hjá sér” (“From his youth he was a very aggressive man and thought everything was beneath him”).<sup>10</sup>

Búi Andriðsson seems a promising boy at first sight: “Hann var brátt mikit afbragð annarra manna ungra, meiri ok sterkari en aðrir menn ok fríðari at sjá” (“He soon stood out from other young men, bigger and stronger than others and more handsome to look at”).<sup>11</sup> In the heathen / non-heathen conflict in the saga he takes sides against paganism: “Hann vildi aldri blóta ok kveðst þat þykja lítilmannligt at hokra þar at” (“He never wanted to make sacrifices saying it was undignified to prostrate himself in this manner”).<sup>12</sup> But although promising, his growing up to become a “real” man is a slow process. He refuses to use weapons and wears a sling tied around his body instead. Slings are obviously not seen as an acceptable weapons and may have been used as toys for young boys.<sup>13</sup>

A young man named Kolfiðr, later to become Búi’s rival and adversary, is even less promising. He is introduced as a typical *kolbíttr*: “Hann var snimma mikill ok ósýniligr, svartr á hár. Hann lagðist á eldgróf ok beit bök af viði steiktan ok gætti katla móður sinnar” (“From an early age he was big and ugly, with black hair. He lay by the hearth and chewed the bark of the charred wood and watched over his mother’s kettles”).<sup>14</sup> The *kolbíttr* (coal-biter) is a frequent motif in Old Norse literature, especially in the *fornaldarsögur*. He is depicted as a lazy, idle boy who stayed round the kitchen chewing the coals of the fire. He enjoys the warmth inside the farm, in the realm of the mother and other women, while real men and boys were playing or working outside. In the *kolbíttr*-pattern, the father rejects the

<sup>10</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 6–7; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 307–308.

<sup>11</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 9; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 308.

<sup>12</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 9; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 308.

<sup>13</sup> Helgi Guðmundsson 1967, 87.

<sup>14</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 9; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 308.

boy, but the mother loves and protects him.<sup>15</sup> In Kolfiðr's case, the father is absent. His mother, Þorgerðr, takes over the father's role, and dislikes the young man's behaviour: "Þorgerði þótti á þessu mein mikit; þó vildi Kolfiðr ráða" ("To Thorgerd this was a great shame, but Kolfinn wanted to do things his way").<sup>16</sup>

When Búi is about to enter adulthood, he is accused of false religion and declared an outlaw at the *Kjalarnesþing* by Þorsteinn Þorgrímsson. Búi ignores his penalty and continues to act as a free man. His behaviour consequently causes a conflict between the two young men. His mother warns him, wanting him to adapt the manner of grown-up men and not to act like a woman: "Þat vilda ek, son minn, at þú færir eigi svá óvarliga; mér er sagt, at Þorsteinn hafi hörð orð til þín; vilda ek at þú létir fara með þér it fæsta tvá vaska menn ok bærir vápn, en færir eigi *slyppr sem konur*" ("I wish you wouldn't travel around so recklessly, my son. I'm told that Thorstein has spoken harsh words about you. I want you to have at least two good men with you and carry weapons, and not go around *unarmed the way women do*").<sup>17</sup> Búi replies that his foster-mother may not be willing to take care of a group of men.

Although Búi continues to be alone and to rely on his sling, he manages to kill one of Þorsteinn's companions by throwing a stone at him. When Esja finds out she clearly indicates that he was assisted by her magic power. She also uses her magic to hide Búi when Þorsteinn's men are pursuing him: "Í því laust myrkri því at hvergi sá af tám sér. Þorsteinn mælti þá: "Nú er við ramman reip at draga, er bæði er að eiga við hund ok tröll."'" ("At this moment a cloud of darkness fell over them, so thick that a man could not see past his toes. Then Thorstein said, we have our hands full now, when we have to deal with both a dog and a *troll*").<sup>18</sup> Búi provocatively entered the temple at Hof where Þorsteinn is lying in front of a statue of Þórr, he kills him by lifting him up and dashing him against a stone. Afterwards

<sup>15</sup> Ásdís Egilsdóttir 2005, 87–89.

<sup>16</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 9; "The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes" 1997, 308.

<sup>17</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 10; "The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes" 1997, 309.

<sup>18</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 11; "The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes" 1997, 309.

he sets the temple on fire. After this incident, Esja knows that he needs her protection and hides him in her cave: “Þar var fyrir þeim hellir fagr. Var þat gott herbergi. Þar var undir niðri fögr jarðlaug. Í hellinum váru vistir ok drykkir ok klæði.” (“in front of them was a fine cave. It was a good place to stay. Just below was a fine warm spring for bathing. In the cave were provisions and drink and clothing”).<sup>19</sup>

Esja’s cave provides Búi with shelter, water and nourishment. A cave is a well-known symbol for a mother’s womb, even that of the primordial Earth Mother. In the narrative, it represents the sheltered life of Búi, who has problems facing the real world of a grown-up man.

While Búi dwells safely in this symbolic womb a new male character is introduced, a Norwegian skipper named Örn. At the same time, Ólöf Kolladóttir re-enters the narrative as a grown-up woman. Ólöf’s father was one of the Irish settlers who travelled with Esja and Andriðr to Iceland. When originally introduced in the saga her exceptional beauty was emphasised: “Þat var at ágætum gert, hversu fögr hon var, ok því var hon kölluð Ólöf in væna” (“Much was made of how beautiful she was, and because of this she was called Olof the Fair”).<sup>20</sup> As a fully grown young woman, Ólöf attracts the attention of young men. Her looks are never described beyond telling that she was beautiful. Her beauty is defined by the eyes of the men who sit and watch and admire her.<sup>21</sup> The first man to notice her is Örn, the Norwegian: “leiddi hann augum til, hversu fögr Ólöf var Kolladóttir” (“he noticed how beautiful Olof Kolladóttir was”) and he begins courting her: “tók hann þá í vana at sitja á tali við hana” (“he made it a habit to sit and talk with her”).<sup>22</sup> The saga-writer uses the common saga-term for courtship “sitja á tali” (“sit and talk”). Ólöf’s father arranged games to entertain the young skipper. The games

<sup>19</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 14; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 311.

<sup>20</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 9; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 308.

<sup>21</sup> Jenny Jochens (1991) has argued that more attention was paid to male than female looks in Old Norse Culture: Helga Kress (1991), on the other hand, has shown how women in the sagas are defined by the eyes of men. Helga does not mention *Kjalnesinga saga*, but Ólöf’s role in the saga corresponds with her interpretation.

<sup>22</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 16; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 312.

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attracted young men who gathered at Kolli's farm to take part in the activities.

Esja tells Búi about Örn and her fear that he might seduce her. When Búi replies that “she deserves a good match”, Esja tells him that she has had Ólöf in mind for him. Esja and Þorgerðr, mother of Kolfiðr, urge their young foster-son and son to join the other young men and woo Ólöf, but Búi and Kolfiðr are reluctant to go. Both Esja and Þorgerðr imply that their son and foster-son are not manly enough and lack courage: Esja mælti: “*Allvesalmannliga* koma þér stundum orð upp” (“You come up with pretty gutless language sometimes”).

Hon [Þuríðr] mælti: “Mikit má skilja,” sagði hon, “til hvers menn eru fæddir í heiminn ok at hverju getið skal verða; þeir sitja tveir menn í Kollafirði ok keppast um Ólöfu ina vænu, ok mörg karlmannlig brögð eru frá þeim sögð. Nú ganga þangað allir ungir menn til leika, en þú ert sú vanmenna, at þú liggr í eldgrófum til hrellingar þinni móður, ok væri betra, at þú værir dauðr, en vita slíka skömm í ætt sinni.”

(“There is a great difference in what men are born into the world for and what they become known for. Two men are sitting at Kollafjord and competing for Olof the Fair, and many manly deeds are being told about them. All the young men are going to the games there, but you are so sluggish that you lie by the fire-pit, a distress to your mother. It would be better that you were dead than to know of such disgrace in our family”).<sup>23</sup>

The young men accept the challenge and leave but they are obviously not ready. Búi still carries his childish sling. Kolfiðr wears ridiculous clothes and carries a wooden pole as weapon, “þótti flestum mönnum hann vera heldr hæðiligr” (“most people thought he looked quite ridiculous”).<sup>24</sup> Both show childish behaviour as suitors. Búi uses his force to pull away two young men who sit near Ólöf and Kolfiðr picks up a chair, places it in front of Ólöf and sits there all day. Kolfiðr's mother offers him necessities that make a real man: fine clothes, weapons and a companion but he refuses. There is an in-

<sup>23</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 17; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 312–313.

<sup>24</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 18; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 313.

evitable conflict after the three young men have sat besides Ólöf's platform for most of the winter. Örn, the apparently more manly and grown-up suitor, resents his two rivals. He can tolerate Búi's presence but finds Kolfiðr unbearable. A fight follows between Örn and Kolfiðr where Kolfiðr fights Örn and his companion with his pole. After having knocked the young companion unconscious, Kolfiðr manages to take his weapons and consequently kills Örn and flees himself to his uncle. Now that Búi's two rivals have been either killed or badly wounded, Esja decides that he is ready to become a man:

“Nú vil ek at þú breytir búnaði þínum; hefi ek hér nú loðkápu, er ek vil at þú berir; skyrta er hér annat klæði; þat þyki mér líkara, at hon slitni ekki skjótt, hvárki fyrir vápnum né fyrnsku; sax er hér inn þriði grip; þess væntir mik, at þar nemi hvergi í höggi stað, því at þú munt nú skjótt verða at reyna hversu þér bíta vápnin.” Búi kvað hana ráða skyldu.

(“Now I want you to change your outfit. I have here a fur cloak which I want you to wear. And here is a shirt as well — I think it is not likely to tear easily, neither from weapons nor sorcery. And here is a third thing, a short-sword. I guess it won't stand still when you swing it; you'll soon have to find out how weapons cut you.” Búi said she should have her way).<sup>25</sup>

The scene can be interpreted as Búi's rebirth. The boy who went into the cave leaves it as a man and his new clothes and weapons symbolise the transformation. At the same time, when Kolfiðr's wounds are healed, his uncle gives him new clothes and weapons and Kolfiðr declares that he is ready to fight Búi and win Ólöf for himself. Before their duel Esja bathes Búi and strokes his entire body. Magical preparation of this kind for battles is a common motif in *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldarsögur*.<sup>26</sup>

Búi manages to wound but not kill Kolfiðr, as might have been expected. He is now the only suitor left. Yet, instead of asking for Ólöf's hand and settling down with her, he abducts her and carries her to Esja's cave. Although they are well received by Esja, Búi's behaviour is not what would have been expected of him and he is still dominated

<sup>25</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 21; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes” 1997, 312–313.

<sup>26</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 22, footnote no. 1.

and controlled by Esja. Even Kolfiðr remarks that Ólöf should not have been taken away like this.<sup>27</sup>

In a battle that takes place after a winter has passed since Ólöf's abduction, Búi still does not defeat Kolfiðr. Although Kolfiðr does not seem a worthy opponent, he can mock Búi and jeopardise his masculinity by comparing him to female animals: “Ef Búi má heyra mál mitt, þá gangi hann ór einstiginu, ef hann hefir heldr manns hug en berkykvendis” (“If Búi can hear what I am saying, and if he has the courage of a man rather than a she-beast, then let him come down from this narrow path”).<sup>28</sup> Esja knows that he still needs her protection. She prevents the fight by causing Búi such pain in his eyes that he is unable leave the cave. In the following summer Esja decides that Búi should now finally leave the cave and travel north to where a ship is waiting to take him abroad. Ólöf is left behind to wait for him for three years.

Búi has numerous adventures abroad, one of which is an affair with Fríðr, daughter of the giant Dofri. Encounters with young giantesses is a frequent theme in the *fornaldarsögur*. The giantesses look repulsive, their leathery clothes are provocative and make their genitals wholly or partly visible. Their overgrown, grotesque femininity may represent the young men's fear of the female body and sexuality. Young men's battles against giantesses can also be interpreted as a fight against the wild, untamed and female in their own nature, which men want to destroy.<sup>29</sup> Fríðr Dofradóttir is of a different kind. The only feature that connects her with giants is her size, apart from which she is beautiful and attractive:

Hon var mikil á allan vöxt; hon var fögr at álitu ok vel búin, í rauðum kirtli ok allr hlöðum búinn, ok digrt silfrbelti um sik. Hon hafði slegit hár, sem meyja siðr er; var þat mikit ok fagrt. Hon hafði fagra hönd ok mörg gull á ok sterkligan handlegg, ok öll var hon listulig at sjá.

(She was large in every respect. She was beautiful to look at, and finely dressed in a red tunic all trimmed with lace, with a thick belt of silver

<sup>27</sup> The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes 1997, 316.

<sup>28</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 25; “The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes”, 316.

<sup>29</sup> McKinnell 2005, 179–180; Helga Kress 1993, 119–135.



round her waist. Her hair was unbound, like a maiden's and was copious and lovely. She had beautiful hands and strong arms with many gold rings on them, and she was quite magnificent to look at.)<sup>30</sup>

Fríðr's name, meaning "beautiful" is an unusual name for a giantess. Names of giantesses usually signify ugliness and grotesque looks.<sup>31</sup> Fríðr belongs to the group of helpful giantesses and Búi needs her assistance to be able to accomplish his assignment. She becomes a mixture of mother and lover, much larger than he is, but physically attractive. When Búi leaves the giants after a whole winter she tells him of the child she is expecting. If it is a boy he will be sent to Búi at the age of twelve. She tells him to accept him, otherwise things will go ill for him. While Búi was abroad, Kolfiðr abducted Ólöf against her and her father's will. Upon Búi's return to Iceland, he has his final fight with Kolfiðr. Kolfiðr tells Búi "that Esja's cave can no longer protect him" ("mun nú eigi hlífa hellir Esju tröllsins sem næst").<sup>32</sup> He has to fight on his own and cannot rely on his proxy-mother's protection. Búi kills Kolfiðr but he is deeply wounded on his arms and legs, where Esja's magical shirt did not shield him. When Búi and Ólöf meet again he returns her to her father instead of marrying her, "ek vil nú þó ekki elska hana, síðan Kolfiðr hefir spillt henni" ("I cannot love her now that Kolfinn has defiled her").<sup>33</sup>

When Fríðr's son, Jökull, arrives, Búi refuses to acknowledge him and proposes a wrestling match instead, to test Jökull's strength. Jökull tries to reach a peaceful agreement, but the fight goes on until Búi is fatally wounded. The life-and-death fight between father and son has some similarities with non-Icelandic texts, such as the *Hildebrandslied* and the Irish Cuchulainn. He also abducts the woman he loves. When training as a warrior, Cuchulainn fights with the woman Aife who equals him in strength. When he overcomes her and threatens to cut her throat she begs him to spare her life. He accepts on the condition that she ceases hostilities with him and his warriors, spends

<sup>30</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 29–30; "The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes" 1997, 319.

<sup>31</sup> See the list compiled by McKinnell 2005, 273–274.

<sup>32</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Kjalnesinga saga* 1959, 40; "The Saga of the People of Kjalarnes" 1997, 325.

the night with him and bears him a son. He returns to Ireland and leaves Aife pregnant, but instructs her that when the son is seven years of age must come to Ireland without identifying himself to anyone. They fight and Cuchulainn kills his only son. Too late he recognised the gold ring he had given Aife to give to the child. However, Cuchulainn is not brought up by a woman and his growing up to manhood is without difficulties.

Masculinity and growing from boyhood to manhood is a recurrent theme in *Kjalnesinga saga*. The narrative reflects the demands that were made on men. The young protagonists do not live up to the expectations of the society and its ideals. Kolfiðr is a typical *kolbíttr*, but unlike the *kolbítar* in the *fornaldarsögur*, he does not grow up to win heroic deeds. Neither Kolfiðr nor Búi have a male role model to emulate as they grow up. Kolfiðr is fatherless and Búi's father is killed when he is young. Búi seems reluctant to grow up and therefore he seeks shelter again in Esja's cave, even after his symbolic rebirth. His foster-mother is protective but also dominating. She makes all important decisions for him. She chooses a bride for him whom he first abducts and then rejects. Búi's relationships with women show his insecurity and dependence. He betrays both mothers of his children, Ólöf by rejecting her, and Fríðr by not acknowledging their son. Búi's refusal to acknowledge Fríðr's son is like a repetition of his rejection of Ólöf. His reluctance to take on the responsibilities of a grown-up man is one of the reasons that causes his tragic death.

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